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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 003911

SIPDIS

FOR A/S DR. FRAZER, DAS YAMAMOTO FROM VICKI HUDDLESTON

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [ET](#) [EE](#) [BORDER](#) [UNREST](#) [ELEC](#)

SUBJECT: MELES MORE UPBEAT ON INTERNAL SITUATION AND E/E BORDER

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston for reason 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary and Action Request: I met with Prime Minister Meles Saturday afternoon on internal and border issues. Meles rejected the possibility of CUDP jailed leaders being released, but promised that the democratic process would proceed with a review of Parliamentary rules, NEB -- National Elections Board -- and Media capacity building, and continued release of the thousands of detainees, but no access by the international community. (Families, lawyers and the Ethiopian Prison Fellowship have met with the political detainees and Meles said the Fellowship would visit the large detention camps.) Post would appreciate DOS/USAID contacting ARIES about providing assistance to the NEB and consider an assistance package to improve the public and private media. He thanked the USG for its principled stand. On Eritrea/ Ethiopian border situation, Meles said the situation was "bad but not that bad." Isaia may understand that he cannot win a war. Ethiopia and Eritrea can manage the border, Ethiopia will not reoccupy all of the TSZ if UNMEE withdraws as the two countries have in the past and can again manage the border. (UNMEE Deputy told me that Ethiopia this weekend occupied post #885 on the Asab road when UNMEE withdrew.) Meles recognized USG role was not unhelpful in negotiating the UNSC resolutions, but asked why we objected to the paragraph on dialogue suggested by Benin since that is the USG position? end summary.

12. (C) I opened the discussion with Prime Minister Meles by telling him that I was pleased that despite his concerns he had not asked me to cancel the lunch for the opposition parliamentarians and the CUDP leaders not arrested. My purpose was to give them an opportunity to exchange views as they had been unable to meet since the demonstrations. Our view remained that they should enter Parliament and take responsibility for the management of Addis Ababa, but this was difficult given the high tensions and mistrust. Now would be a good time for government to seize the initiative and move forward on dialogue, Parliamentary review, capacity building for the NEB, and international access to detainees in the military camp in Dedesa. We were pleased that the Parliament and the City government remained open to the Opposition, but surprised and concerned about the NEB's decision that Merera was no longer the head of his OLP party. Taking these steps would not only improve the domestic situation but demonstrate to the international community that he remained committed to democracy.

13. (C) Prime Minister Meles replied that one chapter had been shut with the CUDP's fomenting of street action. Their unacceptable actions were a threat to democracy and had been going on since May. He had warned them personally and the international community as well. Now there was no turning back. If we imagined that they would be released we were mistaken. They would not. In fact to do so would threaten democracy because it would foster a disrespect for the laws of the country. The population would believe that the international community handed out justice not the government. The government would arrest and try those guilty of insurrection. Some members of embassies continued to harbor some CUDP leaders on the wanted list but that situation would not be allowed to continue.

14. (C) Now a new chapter was opened. The task of the government would be to create a permissive environment that would allow the reforms agreed upon in the dialogue to move ahead. In this regard Meles continued to want to continue the political dialogue initiated by the US and UN with the legal opposition. To promote democratic procedures he would:

- Review Parliamentary procedures either in-house or with the assistance of the international community. The rules would be changed if they were not in compliance with international standards, but they could also be changed if they did not work well for Ethiopia;

- Accept capacity building assistance for the NEB, preferable from ARES, as they had prior experience. When I complained that the current Chairman was waiting for the new Board to be named before accepting international assistance, Meles said that he would tell him to go ahead now; and

-- Assure fair access to the media in cooperation with the Parliamentary opposition, and he planned to work with the donors to provide training for the media. (I suggest we take advantage of this opening by providing assistance to both government and private media.)

15. (C) As for the detainees, he would not permit access by the international community or by the ICRC. The Ethiopian Prison Fellowship had already had access to the CUPD leaders and would also visit the holding facilities where thousands are held. He would not allow the ICRC or international community to visit because the donors -- in the EU - US Ambassadors' Statement had called upon him to do so. The Statement was a public demand and that was unacceptable, especially as it had followed his Statement a day earlier. As a result, only the items in the Ambassadors' Statement which he had already agreed to do and were democratic obligations - Parliament, NEB, Rule of Law, and Media -- would be done. I replied that he was punishing us to make a point. Our Statement was designed to be helpful by showing the way forward and, frankly, it was absolutely necessary given the massive arrests, deaths, and violence. Meles said he was insulted. The British had withdrawn some development assistance, demanding that the CUPD leadership be released but "that would be over my dead body." I said I regretted that he had felt personally insulted. Meles replied that he did not harbor any ill will toward the ambassadors.

16. (C) Meles said he appreciated the principled position of the US; he is pleased with it. Ethiopia would move ahead with development and with democratic reform with or without CUPD. I said I hoped speedily - he concurred. I told him that A/S Jendayi Frazer and DAS Yamamoto would be giving press interviews in the international and Diaspora media, indicating our concerns. Meles reiterated that for the good of the country, it must be democratic.

ERITREA - ETHIOPIA BORDER

17. (C) Meles characterized the border situation as "bad but not that bad." He had seen the latest version of the UNSC resolution that included sanctions. But there was no way forward other than dialogue. Meles said, "this is not a face-saving maneuver rather it is the only way to proceed because to do otherwise would result in war." Meles said he didn't know why we were so worried, there would only be war if Isaias wants war. As long as Isaias is not prepared to go to war the two governments - as they had in the past -- could manage the border. I said that FM Seyoum had told Ambassador Oshima that Ethiopia would reoccupy the Temporary Security Zone if UNMEE withdrew. Meles said no -- that was possibility a misunderstanding -- Ethiopia and Eritrea could resolve the issue of managing the TSZ if neither wished to go to war. UNMEE is a good tripwire but it is not essential. If UNMEE pulls out we would not take back our land.

18. (C) Meles said that if the US tries to force demarcation without dialogue, this will strain our relations. For his part Isaias will not be forced by sanctions or otherwise. But he is not unduly worried about war starting without UNMEE. Isaias might misunderstand but he (Meles) thinks that Isaias now understands because of Ethiopia's strong stand and the quick end to internal violence. I asked if Meles would remove the "in principle" words in his five point plan and if Ethiopia would attend a meeting of the EEBC as the US or the UN would move forward a strategy for meetings with the Witnesses and the EEBC. Meles replied that the international community had urged him to use the words "agree in principle" to the demarcation set by the EEBC, and that Ethiopia would never attend a meeting of the EEBC. The Chairman of the EEBC could be the Eritrea Foreign Minister he was so biased. The EEBC has taken a "political stand."

19. (C) The Prime Minister asked why the USG has opposed the proposal by Benin to include a paragraph advocating dialogue since this was our position. I said that I understood that our concern was procedural. He asked that we reconsider. Turning to Isaias again he said that the worst thing the UNSC could do was to give Isaias reason to act. We should just ignore him as he was "jumping up and down on his bed to gain attention and to get us to act." Meles argued that the Algiers Agreement is a bilateral agreement. Although UNMEE has the responsibility and right to enforce the border agreement, one state can renounce a bilateral agreement if they wished. Did the UNSC interfere in the Nigerian / Cameroon border dispute? Why did it insist on interfering where it has no authority?
HUDDLESTON